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ABSTRACT

Arguing that Mother Goose is becoming an endangered species, this paper reports on the results of an informal survey of undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in a children's literature course. The survey results reported in the paper indicated that some students were able to complete a cloze-type Mother Goose couplet, but others audibly expressed frustration in recalling the words, expressed total unfamiliarity with the selections, or relied on rhyme to complete the couplet. The paper concludes with 10 suggestions to teachers for preserving the endangered familiarity with Mother Goose and to ensure students' listening and subsequent reading pleasure and understanding. The cloze-type test is attached. (RS)

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ANOTHER LOOK AT MOTHER GOOSE: PRIOR KNOWLEDGE OR ENDANGERED SPECIES

Can we ask ourselves as teachers whether much in a teacher's field of knowledge and experience may with time differ from the frame of reference of our students?

Perhaps then, with current emphasis on mapping and schema theory in organizing prior knowledge and experience, the symbolic "endangered species" becomes a note of reality.

In eliciting children's recall of prior experience and developing schemata for teaching and learning, teachers may need to keep a watchful eye and keen ear to any differences between what is expected and what in fact the children produce.

With the momentum of change, even the more recent in-service teacher, in fact, even the pre-service teacher may have disparate resources of learning experiences - for a wide variety of reasons.

If "Mother Goose" can be a sign-post, this may indeed become its useful function, if not its unique feature.

Mother Goose: An Endangered Species

A familiar path in guiding teachers - and prospective teachers to introducing "poetry" to children has been the time-trodden, firmly packed ground of Mother Goose. After all, it is through the initial auditory experience of listening to the Mother Goose rhymes that a child enjoys rhyme - and sometimes reason - rhythm for "rocking and rolling" humor to tickle the tongue and titillate the ear. From the pot pourri of associations with Little Boy Blue and Mistress Mary, Old King Cole and the Queen of Hearts, and the Three Little Kittens and more - emerged the guided extension into the higher levels of poetic qualities. So it is if the Mother Goose experience does in fact exist!

In both graduate and undergraduate courses in Children's Literature over the past several years, allusions to Mother Goose rhymes have been met with a polite complacency or frank expression of deprivation! Although the students have been enthused with the variety of old and new editions, displayed to them, it appeared that they "discovered" the contents as well as the editions.

To explore the "state of the art", I took another path with a dual purpose: if the students could complete a cloze-type Mother Goose couplet, they might be aware of the given anticipated rhyming factor in children's auditory experience. If they could not complete the couplet with a traditional

response, it may be that the Mother Goose experience was forgotten or perhaps was not a common experience for them - or in a very real sense, perhaps not for the children in their classes.

A random selection of 30 beginning lines from an edition of Mother Goose was duplicated and distributed to graduate and undergraduate students in classes in Children's Literature. Undergraduate students, not in education programs, were also asked to complete the exercise to suggest any differences in their responses which could be attributed to orientation, interest or experience.

In all groups, some students enjoyed "knowing" an answer, while others audibly expressed frustration in recalling the word(s). Still others acknowledged total unfamiliarity with the selections. There were no apparent differences in the responsiveness of the education and non-education groups of students.

The tally of the responses provided more information than I sought. Where "cloze" items were completed, the characteristics of the responses suggested that the auditory experience of hearing a "word" without visual reinforcement of print, and/or association with meaning, produced what the student recalled as the word(s) based primarily on the rhyming factor.

Examples of the errors are culled from the total re-

sponses since none of the student groups produced singular results. The reasons for error, this may reveal, are similar across groups. Three types of response were evident:

(1) based on auditory awareness of rhyming:

little Miss Muffet sat on a tuffet.
(bucket, crumpet)
Tom, Tom, the Piper's son, stole a pig...
(bun, gun, drum)
Old King Cole was a merry old soul.
(mole)
Sing a song of sixpence, a pocket full of rye.
(pie, rhyme, cents)
A dillar, a dollar, a 10 o'clock scholar.
(hour, shower, collar)

(2) based on use of context:

Tom, Tom, the Piper's son, stole a pig...
(penny, fiddle, horn)
A dillar, a dollar, a 10 o'clock scholar.
(walk, shadow)
Sing a song of sixpence, a pocket full of rye.
(gold, woe, songs)

(3) based on some familiarity with auditory form and an attempt to represent the corresponding visual (graphic) form:

Old Mother Hubbard went to her cupboard.

(cubbard, cubbet, cupboard semantic clue - "cup")

Little Miss Muffet sat on a tuffet.

(tuffit, puffett)

Ride a cock-horse to Banbury Cross.

(Danbury Source, Bayberry Square)

A dillar, a dollar, a 10 o'clock scholar.

(scoller, hollor)

Three types of response representations were evident: (1) based on auditory awareness of rhyming, (2) based on use of context, (3) based on some familiarity with auditory and an attempt to represent the corresponding visual form (graphemic or spelling errors). Confusion with meanings also appeared to contribute to spelling errors.

Of the 30 given couplets, the least familiar, or those which were left blank most frequently, were

Lucy Locket lost her (pocket).

To market, to market, to buy a fat (pig).

Wee Willie Winkie runs through the (town).

Ride a cockhorse to (Banbury Cross).

Tom, Tom, the piper's son, stole a (pig).

Monday's child is fair of (face).

Hickety-Pickety my black (hen).

From this informal survey, ten (10) suggestions are offered to teachers to consider in the "read-to" classroom activities, not only to preserve the endangered Mother Goose species of our literary heritage but indeed to ensure listening and subsequent reading pleasure and understanding;

1. Explain meanings of words in reading to children. Use the words in other contexts whenever possible. (Introduce multiple-meanings when the moment is right!)

2. Share rhyming words which sound alike but have different meanings. (Homonyms and homographs are usually discovered in print after the auditory experience.)

3. Distinguish between and among the "rhythms" of poems. (One of the special delights of building awareness, of similarities and differences in listening experiences.)

4. Associate visual (graphic) representation of words read orally to children - whenever appropriate.

5. Check understanding of word meaning based on auditory familiarity.

6. Examine spelling errors in all contexts for possible semantic and graphemic confusion.

7. Listen to children repeating and/or reciting any selection learned aurally to clarify meanings. (Group or choral recitations and singing can produce individual confusions which persist at other times. ie. "My country 'tis a-lee'.")

8. When children are ready to read to peers or to younger children, let them read the Mother Goose rhymes and earliest literature, providing a "rationale" for their return to the listening experience of early years.

9. Introduce the historical background of Mother Goose when appropriate to dignify youngsters' association with Mother Goose experience, and to add a dimension of growth to intellectual curiosity. (This can be linked to social studies areas specifically and to interest in authors generally.)

10. Distinguish the poetic qualities which may indeed be found in Mother Goose - uncluttered and unadorned. A poem can "sing" (See Saw Margery Daw) with its music of rhythm and rhyme; it can "tell a story" (Jack and Jill); it can "paint a picture" (I saw a ship a-sailing); it can "tell how we feel" (Three Little Kittens); it can "bring friends together" for reading (Ring Around of Roses); it can "make us laugh" with "tongue-twisters" (Peter Piper).

Indeed, in the beginning of children's experience with poetry, with the beginning of rhyme perhaps even before reason

- in the words of Archibald MacLeish -, a poem "must not mean but be". (Arts Poetica) In the early years a poem may indeed "be" through the realm of delight called "Mother Goose". How much more is this true, when the teacher can be the piper in the classroom - even if only numbered steps ahead of the children....

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Mother Goose Inventory[1]

Undergraduate__ _____
Graduate __ _____
Major _____

Note: Please fill in as many of the following blanks as you can.

1. Little Boy Blue, come blow your _____.
2. Little Jack Horner sat in the_____.
3. Little Miss Muffet sat on a _____.
4. The Queen of Hearts she made some_____.
5. Pease Porridge hot, pease porridge_____.
6. This little pig went to _____.
7. There was an old woman who lived in a _____.
8. Three little kittens lost their _____.
9. Lucy Locket lost her _____.
10. Little Bo-Peep has lost her _____.
11. Wee Willie Winkie runs through the _____.
12. Old Mother Hubbard went to her _____.
13. One, two, buckle my _____.
14. Jack be nimble, Jack be _____.
15. Hey diddle diddle! The cat and the _____.
16. Ride a cockhorse to _____.
17. Tom, Tom the piper's son, stole a _____.
18. Humpty Dumpty sat on a _____.
19. Pussycat, pussycat, where have you _____.
20. Old King Cole was a merry old _____.
21. Georgie, Porgie, pudding and _____.
22. A dillar, a dollar, a 10 o'clock _____.
23. Monday's child is fair of _____.
24. Jack Sprat could eat no _____.
25. Peter, Peter pumpkin _____.
26. Mary had a little _____.
27. To market, to market, to buy a fat _____.
28. Hickety, pickety, my black _____.
29. Mistress Mary, quite _____.
30. Sing a song of six pence, a pocket full of _____.

[1]The Tall Book of Mother Goose. Pictured by Feodor Rojankovsky. Harper & Brothers Publishers, New York. 1942